MELODY GARDOT The Beantown Jazz Festival kicks off with a concert by the husky-voiced spellbinder whose songs were initially inspired by a near-death experience. Still in her early 20s, she now roam the world, gathering acclaim and new experiences to fuel her evolving talent. Sept. 27, 8 p.m. Tickets: $36-$46. Berklee Performance Center. 617-747-2261, www.berkleebpc.com
For Melody Gardot, a bossa nova rebirth

By James Reed
GLOBE STAFF

There's a hierarchy to making records. The debut introduces the artist, gives you a semblance of what he or she is about. For the follow-up, the risk of the dreaded "sophomore slump" lurks. The third album typically goes one of two ways: Either it's a retreat or a rebirth.

Melody Gardot went for rebirth. After two albums of sophisticated jazz with a soft pop sensibility that garnered comparisons to Norah Jones and Madeleine Peyroux, the Philadelphia-bred singer-songwriter took a welcome detour on her latest. "The Absence" is Gardot's approximation of Brazilian bossa nova flecked with flourishes from a time of growth and discovery.

"I traveled for about a year and a half through the southern part of Europe, to Portugal, Spain, parts of Morocco, and then down to South America," says Gardot, who comes to Berklee Performance Center on Thursday as the opening event of the Berklee BeanTown Jazz Festival. "I was interested in learning new instruments and languages and seeing how they all came together. It was interesting to see how every place we went, music was the shaping grounds for the fundamental joy or sadness of the public."

"When it finally came to making this record, there was so much I had seen and so much had changed in the music," she adds. "Before, I was living in Philadelphia and thinking and speaking of things I had experienced in one environment alone. After leaving, I started to feel like I didn't have one home, but that my home was all around the world in these different kinds of music I had discovered."

Melody Gardot, who plays the Berklee Performance Center Thursday, says of "The Absence," her new album, "I wouldn't have been able to do this record before. . . . I hear myself filling out around the edges." "One of the things I realized while putting this record together is that I'll never be that innocent again," Gardot says, adding that the album's cover photo — a provocative image of Gardot in repose (and minimal clothing) — was meant to capture her in full bloom. "If I didn't do [that photo] now, in five years it's going to be a whole different story thanks to gravity. We had to do it now so that I have something to show the grandkids."

MELODY GARDOT
At: Berklee Performance Center, Thursday, 8 p.m.
Tickets: $36-$46. 617-747-2261, www.berklee.edu

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Mark your calendar

**Sept. 27** Berklee BeanTown Jazz Festival opens with Melody Gardot at the Berklee Performance Center. www.beantownjazz.org

“**Two Fabulous Evenings of New POEMJAZZ**” opens at Club Oberon in Cambridge. www.americanrepertorytheater.org/oberon

**Oct. 4** “Honk! Festival” in and near Davis Square in Somerville and Harvard Square in Cambridge. www.honkfest.org

**Oct. 7** Video Game Orchestra at Symphony Hall. www.bso.org

**Oct. 12** Anna Myer and Dancers opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art. www.worldmusic.org

**Oct. 13** Ben Folds Five at the House of Blues. www.livenation.com

**Food Truck Throwdown** on Rose Kennedy Greenway. www.foodtruckthrowdown.com

**Oct. 14** Pat Metheny Unity Band at the Berklee Performance Center. www.berkleebpc.com

**Oct. 15** Joss Stone at the House of Blues. www.livenation.com

**Oct. 17** Alanis Morissette (inset) at the House of Blues. www.livenation.com

**Oct. 18** “Double Indemnity” opens at the Stoneham Theatre. www.stonehamtheatre.org

**JUNE WULFI**
Hailey Niswanger will perform.

SEPTMBER 29
A Party for Your Ears
Follow the sounds of jazz, blues, Latin, and soul music to Columbus Avenue between Mass. Ave. and Burke Street from noon to 6 p.m. Saturday. The 12th annual Berklee Beantown Jazz Festival presents live music on three stages, with no admission fee. beantownjazz.org
Jazz comeback

The state's jazz scene suffered some big blows this summer. One WBGH radio jazz program was drastically scaled back, another eliminated.

In Western Massachusetts, Tanglewood canceled its annual Labor Day weekend jazz festival in favor of a pair of lackluster rock acts (Train and Evanesence).

But this weekend, the Berklee BeanTown Jazz Festival looks to reverse the tide and prove the music — and the community surrounding it — remains full of art and energy.

"When I was growing up here in the '70s, there was a vibrant jazz scene," drummer Terri Lynne Carrington said. "Now it's a struggle to find support. It's horrible what happened on public radio this summer. But, thankfully, Berklee has stepped up and become a major sponsor of the music and the festival." and 2012 Grammy winner, BeanTown is one of the city's largest outdoor events. Stretching six blocks through the South End, the free portion of the fest runs tomorrow with a dozen performers on three stages. Even with a smaller budget, Carrington put together an impressive lineup (Paula Cole, Ralph Peterson, Lalah Hathaway) that is expected to attract as many as 70,000 people.

"Thousands come out because it's a wonderful street scene with wonderful artists, but also because it's free," jazz promoter Sue Auclair said. "While club shows have been doing well, we're still bouncing back from a recession that hurt ticket sales." Club shows with $20 tickets are a much harder sell than the free stages. Also included in the festival are concerts at the Berklee Performance Center — one highlight is a bill featuring piano powerhouse Geri Allen and Joanne Brackeen tonight.

This is one of the reasons so many talented grads skip town for jazz hub New York City as soon as they can. Saxophone whiz Hailey Niswanger and her band, all of whom graduated from Berklee in the last two years, return to play an afternoon set tomorrow. But then it's back to NYC.

"There are just way more club opportunities in New York," Niswanger said. "I was so happy with Berklee, but I also played in non-Berklee groups. With the Either/Orchestra I was always wondering, 'Why aren't we playing more?' Why can't we find the venues?'"

In a city with Wally's (free live jazz 365 days a year since 1947) and Wedged between Montreal and Newport (homes to the world's greatest jazz festivals), the jazz scene in Boston seems to have become too dependent on Berklee. (Through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the college is underwriting much of the 2012 BeanTown fest.)

One hopes a few ears will be turned on to the scene tomorrow and help get jazz more support on the radio and in the clubs.

Go to www.beanownjazz.com

— jjottle@bostonherald.com
Critic's Picks: Jazz

A NIGHT OF TWO PIANOS WITH GERI ALLEN AND JOANNE BRACKEEN Two bold, searching pianists meet fellow female virtuosos Terri Lyne Carrington (drums) and Tia Fuller (sax) to open the Berklee Beantown Jazz Festival, which continues with free shows the next day on Columbus Avenue. Sept. 28, 7:30 p.m. Tickets: $20-$25. Berklee Performance Center, Boston. 617-747-2261, www.berkleebpc.com
FALL JAZZ

1. BERKLEE BEANTOWN JAZZ FESTIVAL, September 27-30 - The former day of celebration has now grown to encompass one long weekend that includes ticketed club and concert events. But the big free bash still takes place Saturday afternoon on multiple outdoor stages between Columbus Ave and Mass Ave from noon to 6 pm. beantownjazz.org

2. MARC RIBOT AND MOSTLY OTHER PEOPLE DO THE KILLING, September 27 - The quintessential downtown NYC guitar savant leads a double bill with the young jazz quartet with the punk name. Institute of Contemporary Art :: icaboston.org

3. AARVARK JAZZ ORCHESTRA, October 3 - Boston's own magnificent avant-garde big band (with serious nods to Ellington and Mingus), led by composer/trumpeter Mark Harvey, celebrate their 40th anniversary with the release of Escalations (Leo). Scullers, DoubleTree Guest Suites, Boston :: scullersjazz.com

Lionel Loueke